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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ROME 001174

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SUBJECT: ITALY SUPPORTS CURRENT EU BURMA POLICY

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Classified By: Political Minister Counselor David D. Pearce for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. Poloff delivered reftel demarche April 13 to Nicola Tassoni, MFA Deputy Southeast Asia Office Director, presenting U.S. concerns regarding some of the statements made at the EC 2006 Burma/Myanmar Forum, and highlighting the importance the U.S. places on coordinating our Burma message closely with the EU and other international partners. Tassoni said the Italian MFA had not sent a representative to the conference and had limited knowledge of what took place. He noted that the EU had reaffirmed its Burma policy only a few weeks ago, including sanctions. While the GOI did not believe that current efforts were bringing progress, Tassoni said that worrying signals from the Burmese junta continued to come and this was not the moment for a change in EU policy. According to Tassoni, the GOI had submitted to the EU April 12 its ideas on how to increase cooperation with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) on Burma, including a proposal for a message to Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar expressing the EU's positive view of his visit. End summary.

¶2. (C) Emphasizing the regime's role in generating humanitarian problems, Poloff noted to Tassoni, as per reftel, that political reform was the only long-term solution to the socio-economic situation in Burma, and expressed U.S. concern with remarks at the EC 2006 Burma/Myanmar Forum calling for increased engagement. Italy was not involved in the preparation work for the Forum, nor did the Italian MFA send a representative, according to Tassoni, so the GOI was unaware of the details of the discussion. Tassoni, emphasizing that this was speculation, noted that since the forum was organized by Euro-Burma, a Brussels-based NGO that is very concerned about humanitarian aid, the calls for increased aid might have been a related to the organizers' agenda.

¶3. (C) The EU Burma policy was rearticulated a few weeks ago, according to Tassoni, with easy agreement that the EU should continue the same approach, including sanctions, limited contact with the GOB, visa restrictions, and economic restrictions. Tassoni emphasized that there was no real debate among members on changing the policy, with a quick,

unanimous decision to uphold the current EU stance.

¶4. (C) Within the EU, Tassoni noted that Italy was one of the countries asking itself if the approach was the right one, given the GOI's perception of a lack of progress. However, seeing the worrying signs from the junta, and its continued isolationist signals, Tassoni said Italy believes this is not the moment for a change in the EU's Burma policy.

¶5. (C) In the longer term, Tassoni noted the GOI's concern about the next generation of Burmese leaders. He highlighted the inclusion of children of regime members in the current visa ban as a potential concern for the political development of the country, which could lead to a future where new leaders, in an extension of the current regime, come to power with no practical experience of the Western world. According to Tassoni, the current ban only made sense if we just considered the possibility of a radical change in the Burmese regime. However, he noted this was a long-term issue to consider, not to be decided at this moment.

¶6. (C) Tassoni recalled Italy's attempts at a dialogue with Burma in November, noting that Italy had been interested in seeing if a productive exchange could be possible. However, Tassoni said the GOI has seen no positive signs from Burma and has concluded there is no possibility for constructive engagement with the junta.

¶7. (C) Italy values very positively the increased involvement of ASEAN countries in Burma issues, Tassoni said. He noted that the GOI was developing ideas about how to create the conditions for more cooperation between the West and ASEAN in our approaches to Burma. According to Tassoni, the West alone did not have enough leverage with the Burmese regime and would need to work closely with Asian partners. As long as East and West maintained a separate approach to Burma, the

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regime would feel it could look to its neighbors for protection, Tassoni noted.

¶8. (C) April 12 Italy presented a paper to the EU that it hoped would help build bridges between ASEAN and the West. Tassoni noted the GOI believed it might be able to contribute to confidence-building measures between Southeast Asia and the West because it had been able to acknowledge that there were other perspectives on dealing with the Burmese junta. Although there had been some difference in approaches, Italy believed there was a basic, common message the international community could send that would have an impact on the regime, Tassoni said. Even if the tone of Asian countries was slightly different, if the junta heard the same message from all sides, Tassoni believed it would have an effect.

¶9. (C) Although its results were limited, Tassoni noted that the GOI viewed positively the Malaysian Foreign Minister's trip to Burma. In particular, he said, it was important to have had an ASEAN fact-finding visit, and Italy considered it a change from ASEAN's non-interference policy. Recent ASEAN involvement showed the organization recognized Burma problems were having an impact on the overall credibility of the region, according to Tassoni. The GOI believed ASEAN's current approach acknowledged, in a way, that Burma was an exception within the region.

¶10. (C) Italy viewed FM Syed Hamid's visit as courageous, and Tassoni noted the importance of the FM cutting the trip short when it became obvious he would not be allowed to meet with imprisoned opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. In their April 12 Burma paper to the EU, the MFA suggested Brussels send a message to FM Syed Hamid to express the EU's positive view of the visit, with an aim to encourage ASEAN efforts. Tassoni said that it was important to send a message that Asian countries could agree with, noting "we don't want to force ASEAN to point out differences in our views." He stated that it might be necessary for countries in Southeast

Asia to use a different tone in their approach to the junta, given that Burma was a member of ASEAN, but that cooperation on Burma was vital. While the GOI's EU communique stressed the need to work with Asian partners, Tassoni noted that a unified Western approach was also a necessity.

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